



Islamic Thought and Civilization (JITC)

Volume 11 Issue 2, Fall 2021

ISSN_P: 2075-0943, ISSN_E: 2520-0313

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.11.2>

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/JITC>

Journal QR Code:



Article:

Nationalization of Religious Identity: Pakistan between Saudi Arabia and Iran 1979-1988

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Published:

Fall 2021

Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.11.2.16>

QR Code:



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Citation:

Faheem, Farrukh, Wang Xingang, Sajjad Hussain, Musarrat Iqbal and Farhat Iqbal. "Nationalization of religious identity: Pakistan between Saudi Arabia and Iran 1979-1988." *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 11, no. 2 (2021): 290–308.

[Crossref](#)

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Publisher Information:

Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization, School of Social Science and Humanities, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

Indexing



Nationalization of Religious Identity: Pakistan between Saudi Arabia and Iran 1979-1988

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Abstract

Zia ul-Haq, President of Pakistan (1977-1988), introduced Islam into the public and political realms. Once he grabbed power in Pakistan after ousting the elected government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Islam became his strategic choice to provide legitimacy to his military coup and to expand his role in the Muslim world. Since the independence of Pakistan, the state had used Islam on many occasions to serve its interests. The encouraging results in this respect further induced the state to use Islam more frequently to achieve its domestic and foreign objectives. Zia institutionalized Islam in every aspect of the Pakistani state and society. Religious nationalization was the cornerstone of the Zia regime's internal and external policies. The Islamization of the regime in Pakistan during the 1980s was the zenith of the state's gradual turn towards religion. Regional upheavals such as the *Shi'a* Islamic revolution in Iran and Soviet invasion of neighboring Afghanistan were incremental to continue Islam as a strategic asset in Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy. As a result, Pakistan became the launching pad both for the Middle Eastern *Sunni* Arabs monarchies and Iran's *Shi'a* clergy to furnish their political cum sectarian agenda that ultimately ravaged the Pakistani polity and society.

Keywords: identity, Islam, Iran-Saudi rivalry, Middle East, Sectarianism, the Afghan refugee

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Introduction

Pakistani society gradually adhered to Islam since its dismemberment in 1971. After the debacle of Dhaka, the political leadership of Pakistan re-constructed its identity with more enforcement about its Islamic credentials. Dejected, displaced, and defeated Pakistan needed a new direction to overcome its problems, and the country's elite found Islam as a remedy. When Zia ul Haq came into power after ousting the popular government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977, he used Islam to provide legitimacy to his military government and at the same time to appease the discontented masses of the country. On the other side, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the *Shi'a* Islamic revolution of Iran increased the role of religion in the region. Pakistan with the backing of the US and Saudi Arabia used religion to achieved their regional and international agendas. In subsequent years Islam became a compass to ascertain the domestic and foreign policy objective of the Pakistan. "With the advent of Zia ul-Haq's regime and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a wave of Islamization swept through Pakistani society and came to influence the government and its domestic and foreign policies."¹ This political use of Islam brought havoc to Pakistan's state and society in form of millions of stranded Afghans refugees and sectarian conflicts between *Shi'a* and *Sunni* sects. In subsequent years both the above issues somehow and others devastated the Pakistan's social, political, and economic landscape. Since its inception on the political map of the world in 1947, Pakistan was stranded to ascertain its identity.

2. Question of Identity

Pakistan was carved out from colonial retreat from the Indian-Subcontinent after the Second World War. British Colonizers destroyed the indigenous sense of identity of all Indians to accomplish their interests. This was an old strategy of the colonizers wherever they conquered the land. Compartmentalization of identities with imperialist narrative recreated after the post-colonial era in newly independent states and same happened with Pakistan and India. After the end of colonization, the new state Pakistan has to re-build its identity according to its requirements that were further adjusted with the local prerequisites. "In –short, state-led Islamization is, in essence, the indigenization of the postcolonial state-embedding it in the local value systems."²

Similarly, the abolishment of the Ottoman caliphate brought a paradigm shift in Muslim politics around the globe. The Muslims in Indo-Pak found the opportunity to get rid of the British's Colonial tutelage, and used the Caliphate symbol to save their Islamic identity. Indian Muslims kick-started '*Tahreek-e-Khilafat*' (Caliphate Movement) to protect and restore Caliphate. For Muslims, the caliphate is the most revered institution that was under duress from the enemy of Islam. These feelings reverberate the Indian

¹Svante. E. Cornell, "Pakistan Foreign Policy: Islamic or Pragmatic," in Brenda Shaffer, ed., *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006), 291.

²Francois Burgat, *L'islamisme en Face*, Translation [Face to Face to Political Islam], (Paris: Discovery/Poche, 1996).

Muslims who were under alien tutelage and have a great sense of loss of their identity took shelter in Islam. “The ascendancy of Islamist ideology and activism over the past two decades has perhaps been the most significant change in the paradigm of politics across the Muslim world.”³

During Pakistan’s movement, Islam was opted as a common identity to get a separate homeland from the British and Hindu dominance. The state’s foundation of Pakistan was laid on the cornerstone of the two-nation theory that subsequently became the state’s ideology. After independence, Pakistani’s state incorporated Islamic ideology among its masses. “In this country (Pakistan) religious identity was integrated into state ideology to inform the goal and process of development with Islamic values.”⁴

Newly independent Muslim states also required legitimacy to rule over their masses. In this regard, Islam was applied as a cohesive force because many Muslim states had multi-ethnic and multi-lingual people to rule and managed. The same was the case with Pakistan, “To dominate the Islamist discourse, these states ad to become legitimate Islamic actors. Hence, state-led Islamization was a conscious strategic choice on the part of some states to strengthen state institutions and expand state power, capacity and reach.”⁵

Pakistan was an underdeveloped state that was further destabilized by many internal and external factors. Due to such pressure, the state took refugees under Islam. To smoothly rule over the people State’s elite permanently applied Islam to control the masses and to extract their foreign policy objectives especially connected with the Muslim world. It was their rational approach to use Islam as a prospect rather than a challenge to their authority. “Pakistan can be characterized as a weak state, wherein ruling regimes have made prolific use of Islamic symbols and policies to shore up state authority at a critical juncture-viewing Islamic politics as an opportunity than a challenge.”⁶

According to Vali Nasr “the scramble for Pakistan vested the future state with both colonial-era social structure and intermediaries of power, and Islamic universalism.”⁷ Islam was a basic reason for the creating of Pakistan, it was meant to protect the political, social, economic, and religious rights of the Muslims living under the Hindu majority in the un-divided subcontinent. The success of the strategy to use Islam to gain results gave permanence to Pakistan’s successive ruling elite policy towards its relationship with the Middle East. Islam resurfaces whenever the state requires it and goes into hibernation after achieving its objectives. “The demand for Pakistan was not about religion, but about

³Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent- The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

⁴Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁵Ibid., 17.

⁶Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and the Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁷Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power*, 47.

safeguarding Muslim rights and privileges in Hindu India. Still, it was closely associated with Islam as Identity and would in time serve to mobilize it.”⁸ Therefore, Islam was a matter of pick and choice for Pakistani’s ruling echelon in their foreign policy pursuits. It was a survival strategy that they applied whenever they faced any challenge to their power. As Mumtaz Ahmed commented that, “Islamism would emphasize the imperative of legitimacy, arguing that the turn to Islamization was a reactive policy – a type of survival strategy- to protect the state from serious challenges to its authority.”⁹

During 1970, and 1980 the limitation and restraint of postcolonial states became more visible. As the pressure and crises mounted in the states the need for workable ideologies that would have more effective results has grown. Such circumstances encouraged the leaderships to move away from dominant ideologies of the time, like nationalism and secularism to embrace new ideologies that attract society’s large segments and are based on popular practices and cultural views.

Time and again whenever Pakistan felt insecure due to regional disturbance or economic dilapidation it vociferously chanted the need of *ummah* for moral and political boost. This was the same mantra of Islam and *Ummah*, when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto held the reign of Pakistan after the 1971 debacle of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The same rhetoric was repeated by the Zia when he faced the critical situation to provide legitimacy to its military regime. Zia said in his speech that “Pakistan, which was created in the name of Islam, will continue to survive only if it sticks to Islam. That is why I (Zia) consider the introduction of as an essential prerequisite for the country”. It was Pakistan’s elite popular maxim that “Nationality is irrelevant within the *ummah*, within the universal brotherhood of Islam, or the commonwealth of Muslim nations.”¹⁰

3. Zia’s Islamisation Agenda

From its very first day, when Zia seized the power, he made use of religious rhetoric in state policy. It took him just a few months to figure himself a “savior of Islam” chosen by destiny” to complete the mission for which Pakistan has been created.

In 1977 Pakistan’s army chief dispelled Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s civilian government and took over the reign. Being a military man and a usurper of power, Zia needs legitimacy for his rule. In this situation Islam suits him to fulfill his agendas. “In 1979 General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, the military ruler of Pakistan declared that Pakistan would become an Islamic state. Islamic values and norms would serve as the foundation of national identity, law, economy, and social relations, and would inspire all policy making.”¹¹ Zia

⁸Ibid.

⁹Mumtaz Ahmed, “The Crescent and Sword: Islam, the Military, and Political Legitimacy in Pakistan: 1977-1985,” *The Middle East Journal* 50, No. 3 (1996): 372-386.

¹⁰Tahir Amin, *Ethno-National Movements of Pakistan* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1988), 172.

¹¹Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power*.

used Islam just for mundane purposes, although he has a religious background (his father was an imām in a mosque). “Zia ul Haq took over where Bhutto had left off. He, too, sought to Islamicize for a chiefly practical reason.”¹²

Zia also understood the importance of Pakistan’s special relationship with the Middle East and the Islamic world. In the very first few months in his office, he visited Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Turkey, Jordan, and Libya. The main objectives of these visits were Zia’s familiarization with Islamic countries’ leadership and to maintain high-level contacts with Islamic states and neighbors. Zia did not have diplomatic skills like Bhutto, but he was shrewd and not a risk-taker. He tried not to jeopardize his country’s relations with important countries and it is evident in his handling of Pakistan’s foreign policy. “Pakistan which was created in the name of Islam will continue to survive only if it sticks to Islam. That is why I consider the introduction of {an} Islamic system as an essential prerequisite for the country,” he said (Zia ul Haq).¹³

Zia, adeptly used the OIC forum to enhance its Pan-Islamic program. Pakistan’s efforts to promote the Islamic causes are reflected in the Makkah declaration. “All Muslims, differing though they may be in their language, color, domicile, or other conditions, from one [single] nation, bound together by their common faith, moving in a single direction, drawing on one common cultural heritage, assuming one mission throughout the world.”¹⁴ He masterfully tried to present himself as a good alternate of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to steer the destiny of the Muslim world in world affairs. To achieve these goals, he brought a wide range of programs to Islamize the Pakistan’s state and society.

Zia ul Haq skillfully used the normative symbols of nationalism and Islam or more appropriately, through religious nationalization, able to achieve political legitimacy at home and also effectively achieved foreign challenges faced by his military regime. He added another element in this axis of Pakistan’s Islamic credentials that was military, thus ‘Islam, Pakistan, and the military regime became united in an indivisible trinity.’¹⁵ He defined and defended his regime’s policy in terms that “Islamic revivalist ideas and practices on the one hand, and the ideological commitment to the Pakistani state, on the other.”¹⁶

¹²Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (London: I. B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2015), 173.

¹³Shuja Nawaz, *Cross Swords* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 364.

¹⁴“Makkah Declaration,” *OIC Resolution at the Makkah/Taif Summit* (Jeddah: OIC Secretariat, n.d), 3.

¹⁵Zia ul Haq, *interviews with Foreign Media* (Vol. 1. Islamabad, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting), 18-21, 117-24, 200-205.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

Zia propagated that Islam and Pakistan are the names of the same thing. “Pakistan and Islam are the names of the same thing.”¹⁷ Thus Islam and Pakistan became the two sides of the same coin. By inventing this narrative, he not only strengthened his hold on power but also gave way to re-build ties with the Middle East states. “Pakistan and Islam are the names of the same thing and any idea or action contrary to this would mean hitting at the very roots of the ideology, solidarity, and integrity of Pakistan.”¹⁸

Zia very well understood the political and economic prospects of his country and more importantly for his legitimacy that was associated with the Middle East. For this purpose, after controlling the government “Zia also sought support from Middle Eastern allies, who were recently enriched by the aftermath of the 1973 oil crises.”¹⁹ The upcoming regional and international affairs furthered his Islamisation agenda to be fulfilled.

4. Regional Upheavals, Pakistan on Crossroads

In many ways, 1979 was an unprecedented year, in this year various regional and international events somehow or other affected Pakistan. Especially in Pakistan’s immediate neighborhood going through a massive change. The Shah of Iran was ousted from Iran, by the *Shi’a* clergy headed by Khomeini and Russia invaded Afghanistan to save its backed communist regime. It looks that Pakistan’s worst nightmare going to be in reality, Russia on its border and trustworthy Shah ousted from Iran. As, the Shah of Iran, throughout Pakistan history, was its best friend and neighbor, who always extended his hand, whenever Pakistan was in trouble. Pakistan was not prepared for these un-sudden changes. But Pakistan under Zia, after assessing the situation, handled the matters, tactfully. Pakistan wasted no time in contact with the new clergy regime in Iran. The new Iranian regime had some apprehensions about Pakistan’s past cordial relationship with the Shah of Iran. Most importantly Pakistan’s past friendly relation with the previous regime and close ties with Saudi Arabia disturbed the new Government of Iran.

Similar was the case of Pakistan’s relationship with Afghanistan. The communist revolt in Afghanistan ousted the Sardar Daud’s government. Although Daud has not had an ideal relationship with Pakistan but Pakistan’s western borders were stable Pakistan’s western borders were stable there was a stability on Pakistan’s western borders. In his last years, Daud has accepted Pakistani’s position and showed interest to make a strong affiliation with Pakistan. But Russian backed communist elements faded any such change.

Unwanted and sudden changes in Pakistan’s instant neighborhood proved fatal for Pakistan. In Afghanistan, Marxist *Khalq* and *Parcham* two rival forces with Russian mentorship accepted the partnership formula to rule Afghanistan but soon there started a

¹⁷Naveed S. Sheikh, *The New Politics of Islam: Pan-Islamic Foreign Policy in a World of States* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 86.

¹⁸*Dawn*, 27 October 1982.

¹⁹Svante. E. Cornell, “Pakistan Foreign Policy: Islamic or Pragmatic,” in Brenda Shaffer, ed., *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy*, 312.

civil war that resulted in millions of Afghans' refugee exodus towards Pakistan. This situation aggravated when USSR intervened in Afghanistan's affairs. Russian's invasion brought the international forces in the region to settle their score with Russia. There started an unending war in Afghanistan, whom Pakistan is the major victim.

Another neighbor Iran became *Shi'a* State. There the clergy-led Government starts exporting the *Shi'a* Islam in the neighborhood. While Pakistan being a *Sunni* majority country has apprehensions about with Iran's religious agenda. Another test of Pakistan's diplomatic ability was yet waiting in Iran, where street demonstrations against the Shah resulted in his expulsion from Iran. The Shah ouster paved the way for *Shi'a* clergy to control the state and society. "Tens of thousands of Iranian flooded Tehran's centers demanding the abdication of the Shah and the expulsion of his American advisors." In the deteriorating circumstances, Pakistan's close relationship with the Shah caused embarrassment for Pakistani's government. It was a very difficult time for Pakistan because the Shah in Iran and Anwar Sadat of Egypt both were very important friends of Pakistan. Their ouster was a bad omen for Pakistan. By the end of 1979, southwest Asia was in chaos. A revolution in Iran had replaced a secular pro-United States monarchy with a radical Islamist regime.

The following events not only changed the current scenario but also set the future course of history. On 27th December 1979, Russian forces to save the Marxist revolution in Kabul entered the Afghan territory with a large army. This invasion of Russia caused a panic in Afghanistan that resulted in fleeing the Afghans to Pakistan, Iran, and other neighboring countries for refuge. During a massive migration, more than one Million Afghans took refuge in Pakistan that ruined the fabric of the already fragile society of Pakistan.

When USSR invaded Afghanistan, Pakistan was soon deeply involved in the Afghan *jihād* against the Soviets."²⁰ The paradigm shift in the region that happened after the USSR intervention and further invasion in Afghanistan and similarly Islamic revolution of Iran have the long-lasting effects on the region. These two events changed the geostrategic objectives of the regional and global players that ultimately transformed the states and societies in the region. Being a neighbor and Islamic country Pakistan was the major victim of both the events that eventually renovated its internal and external objectives. "The geostrategic considerations and the imperative of territorial integrity thus became intertwined with the ideological identity of Pakistan."²¹

After the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan started her diplomatic struggle to muster the favor and help of the Western and Islamic world to tackle this big problem. In 1980, President Zia presided over an extraordinary session of Islamic conference and tried

²⁰Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (London: I. B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 2015), 167.

²¹Mumtaz Ahmad, "The Crescent and the Sword: Islam, the Military, and Political Legitimacy in Pakistan, 1977-1985," *Middle East Journal* 50, No. 3 (1996): 372-386.

to persuade the Islamic world, the actual condition after the Russian aggression on Afghan territory, and its consequences on the Islamic countries. Pakistan's strategy was to galvanize the Islamic world to a common cause and chalk out a consensus policy to handle the situation. Zia rhetorically pleaded the Pakistani and Afghanistan case among the Muslim nations and symbolized the invasion of Afghanistan, as the incident of arson of *Al Aqsa* Mosque, and only after the Second World War, any superpower invaded on a sovereign, non-aggressive Muslim country. He also questioned, "Why Muslim lives everywhere were in jeopardy in so many areas of the World, and now in Afghanistan, he replies the query himself and said because, Muslims portray weakness to the rest of the World, a weakness that stems from our lack of conviction and faith."²²

Zia called for deliberation for the establishment of a joint defense alliance of Muslim *Ummah* to save their common interests. He also used the forum for a wide appeal to help the Afghan refugees stranded in Pakistan and other neighboring countries. It was Zia's foremost goal to activate the Muslim *Ummah*. This stance could provide him legitimacy as Pakistani's ruler and gather the favor of the Islamic world for Afghanistan's cause. Zia once said that, "Establishment of Islamic *Ummah* is ordained by God and negating this would be to go against the word of God. Going against the word of God brings retribution."²³ All these efforts from Pakistan brought very few material gains for Pakistan from the Islamic world, except for some help from Saudi Arabia Egypt. The war between Iran and Iraq that started in 1980 provided another opportunity to Zia, to plead for unity among the Muslim states, for the common reason of the Muslim *Ummah*. "But this effort too was without a satisfactory result."²⁴

But Zia did not lose his heart and was able to form the *Ummah* Peace Committee. This body was very instrumental in the initial years of the Iran-Iraq war for a peaceful settlement. Zia started a shuttle diplomacy endeavor to solve the Iran-Iraq war. But in the end, he was pained that both countries refused to listen to him. Although Pakistan under Zia failed to inspire a larger Muslim World with his diplomacy to ally *Ummah*, he was enabled in making an important strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia. This partnership was based on mutual interest, like Pakistan, who needed a friend in the Muslim world who could help her financially. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia wanted Pakistan on its side after the *Shi'a* regime came into power in Iran. The war between Iran and Iraq gradually increased the tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran and Saudi Arabia were fighting for political and religious hegemony in the Gulf region and in the Middle East.

In the prevailing panic, Pakistan was the most trusted friend that, these *Sunni* Arab leaders could trust easily for their defense. During 1983-84 Pakistan's military presence

²² "Extraordinary Session of the Islamic Conference," (26 January 1980, *Foreign Affairs Pakistan*, 7, 1, Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 1980), 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁴ Richard F. Nyrop, ed., *Pakistan a Country Study* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1984), 250.

increased very much in the Gulf region, a new contingent of “20,000 Pakistani soldiers were dispatched to Saudi Arabia, another 10,000 to an area of Sheikhdoms where they supplemented indigenous defenses.”²⁵ During this period, the Muslim world was inflamed with conflicts, the Iran-Iraq war, Afghanistan Crises, the Lebanese civil war, and the Arab-Israeli confrontation. Pakistan confronted and handled all the conflicts with determination, despite facing stiff resistance from adversaries, and placed herself as the leading Islamic country. Throughout this period Pakistan’s diplomacy mainly relied on the principle of “maneuver with flexibility on multiple fronts.”²⁶

5. Pakistan between Saudi Arabia and Iran Rivalry

Pakistan cannot be neutral due to its stronger cultural, economic, and defense ties both with Saudi Arabia and Iran but it promotes this rhetoric due to a combination of demographic, geographic, and geopolitical factors. Islamabad’s claim of neutrality serves the dual purpose of the national interests in domestic and foreign affairs. But it was not easy for Pakistan to satisfy its partners at the same time. “At times, Pakistan was walking on a tightrope. In August 1987, when Iranian pilgrims and Saudi security forces clashed in Mecca, leaving some 400 people dead, the Pakistanis were highly uneasy about the role they found themselves playing.”²⁷

Iran under the clergy was very anxious about Pakistan’s regional urgencies; they also knew the bond of Shah of Iran with Pakistani’s establishment. For these reasons they never trusted Pakistani’s role and considered it as an Arab proxy in the region. Even, “Some sources claim that at this juncture Khomeini issued a *fatwa*, (a religious decree) and banned any cooperation between Iran’s military and that of Pakistan due to the letter’s close collaboration with the house of Saud.”²⁸ But from reliable sources, such decree has never been proven.

Zia’s regime had faced immense pressure from his Arab protagonists who forced him to join hands against the *Shi’a*’s clergy of Iran but he convincingly refuted to become part of the problem rather than a solution. “The contrary partnership that Zia ul Haq had put together proved cumbersome to synchronize. Most notably, Zia ul Haq refused *Sunni*’s Arab states demands to back Iraq in its war against Iran.”²⁹ This crisis for the time being evaded by Pakistan’s government to surrender to these demands.

Soon Iran’s felt the heat of global isolation and started looking for friends. In its search, the revival of RCD was the immediately available option to kick start the regional

²⁵James John Tritten, *The Military Balance 1983-1984* (London: The Institute of Strategic Studies, 1983), 97.

²⁶Khalid Bin Said, “Pakistan in 1983,” *Asian Survey* 24, 2 (February 1984): 227.

²⁷Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence*, 179.

²⁸Skype interview with Ali-Akbar Omaid-Mehr, 11 August 2011, as Quoted in, Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence*, 180.

²⁹Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence*, 180.

stalemate. In 1985 RCD reincarnated with the name of ECO, (Economic Cooperation Organization). “By March 1985, the RCD was revived, albeit under a new name: Economic Cooperation Organization (EC). As with the RCD, Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan were the only members but were later joined by Afghanistan and former Soviet republics that became independent in 1991.”³⁰

Pakistan’s vibrant role in the Muslim community often paid it immensely. Its professional army, active participation in Muslim causes all made it an important member of the umma. “The advantage, however, has also been strategic, for Pakistan’s activism has secured it high-ranking positions within the OIC.”³¹ Pakistan shared from the Middle East petrodollar economy, increased from \$2.128 billion in 1981 to the following few years. Pakistan’s defense engagements in the region also enhance, due to uncertainty and insecurity that prevailed in the Arab *Sunni* Monarchies, after *Shi’a* Islamic revolution in Iran. The fear of, the export of Shi’ism and the anti-monarchy move that succeeded in Iran was a time bomb for Arab *Sunni* Kings and dictators.

Pakistan understood it very much that the Gulf States had inherited many contradictions that ultimately made them insecure in the region. This insecurity leads them towards an imaginary Islamic block. Pakistan too faced the same danger of isolation and imminent threats from its adversaries. Such common threats and in-securities cemented both Pakistan and the Arab world’s feelings for the unification of *ummah*. Pakistani’s leadership furthered the idea of collective defense of Muslim countries after purported such fears. “Muslim countries must consider ways and means for the collective defense of *ummah* rather than the defense of individual countries.”³²

Reciprocally, Saudi’s time and again made it realized to Pakistan and its people that Saudi Arabia is an all-weather friend of Pakistan. On many occasions, Saudi’s authorities reasserted their support to Pakistan and claimed that “any interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan would be considered interference or injury to the [Saudi] kingdom.”³³

By providing security services to the Gulf States, Pakistan also tried to minimize Indian presence in these countries. Statistically, India is a bigger partner of the Gulf countries in any matter. India, Gulf strategic contributions are increasing day by day. But so far Pakistan has some advantages over India in this regard. “Pakistan has found a convenient supporter of its India-bashing campaign in Saudi Arabia, in return for which it has provided a

³⁰Ibid., 181.

³¹Naveed S. Sheikh, *The New Politics of Islam: Pan-Islamic Foreign Policy in a World of States*, 87.

³²Inaugural address by President Zia ul Haq, *Extraordinary Islamic conference of Foreign Ministers* (Islamabad: Ministry of Foreign Information and Broadcasting, 1980), 20.

³³S. Tahir-Kheli, *The United States and Pakistan: The Evolution of an Influence Relationship* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 160.

permanent military presence in the Gulf, both in combat forces and in technical-cum-advisory capacity.”³⁴

Pakistan always proved itself as a trusted ally of the Saudi Kingdom whenever it faced any internal and external aggression. In the past, Pakistan’s military provided Saudi Arabia manpower to establish its control over the country. In this way, Pakistan not only satisfied its religious charged masses but at the same time derived money from Saudis in exchange for providing them security. Similarly, due to Pakistan’s non-Arab background, Saudis prefer the presence of Pakistan’s army on its land. Whenever there is a crisis in Saudi Arabia, they call first to their Muslim brethren from Pakistan to come and help them. The same was the circumstances during the first Gulf war, when Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, also brought insecurities in other Arab capitals. During the first Gulf War, Pakistan assigned a military division to Saudi disposition to help the pro-Iraqi war effort.

5. *Shi’a, Sunni Cleavage*

The Shah of Iran’s departure in awkward ways also created problems for Pakistan. With his departure, Pakistan lost a trusted friend and patron. Pakistan’s relationship with Iran further deteriorated when Russia invaded Afghanistan. Zia after assessing the new scenario commented that “Immediately after the Soviet invasion, Zia ul Haq regretted that ‘Iran can no longer be counted on or support. The country was in a state of xenophobia’, he said, and its leadership ‘believe the whole world against them.’”³⁵

Islamic Revolution of Iran has wider effects on Pakistani’s state and society. The ongoing race of political cum religious hegemony in the Middle East between Iran and Saudi Arabia ravaged the other surrounding countries. Pakistan being a balancer in the Middle East was the target of *Shi’a* and *Sunni* rivalry. Being a *Sunni* majority nation with a substantial *Shi’a* minority Pakistan witnesses a series of sectarian extremist activities throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Saudi Arabia and Iran deployed their proxies (an affiliation of sectarian outfits under the banner of religious parties) against each other on Pakistani soil. “A vicious retaliatory cycle, pitting extremist *Sunni* and *Shi’a* groups against each other, had been born and began to ravage Pakistani society.”³⁶

Before the *Shi’a* Islamic revolution of 1979 Pakistan was relaxed with its relationship with the secular leadership of Iran. But the new regime’s religious goals disturbed the social fabric of Pakistan. Now Pakistan was not only deprived of the economic benefits associated with the Shah of Iran government but also has to minimize the increasing *Shi’a* influence of Iran on its large *Shi’a* population. “Within a year of Iran’s revolution Zia ul Haq’s government was deeply angered by Tehran’s new crop of diplomats, whom they regarded

³⁴Naveed S. Sheikh, *The New Politics of Islam: Pan-Islamic Foreign Policy in a World of States*, 93.

³⁵Foreign and Commonwealth Office File 1519551, 17 December 1979.

³⁶Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence*, 175.

as inciting the Pakistani's *Shi'a*.³⁷ In Pakistan *Shi'a* Muslims are "Almost 20% of the total population of Pakistan is practicing *Shi'a* who has great esteem for Iran."³⁸ Such a large population convulsion towards religious fervor under the Iranian influence could be dangerous for Pakistan.

Pakistani's *Shi'a* did not bother what was happening in Iran, before 1979. But this lukewarm attitude of Pakistan's *Shi'a* population over nightly changed into esteem and reverence for Iran's revolutionary regime. "This respect for Iran over nightly increased after the 1979 revolution because after this Iran considered to protect the rights of *Shi'a* wherever in the world they are living"³⁹ this situation was not a good sign for the Pakistani state. Because the *Shi'a* population in Pakistan was a peaceful and inactive sect but the revolution gave them a new sense of identity and center to increase their community stature. The Shah of Iran never used *Shi'a* Islam to promote himself or as a tool in foreign policy, he had a secular outlook. But once *Shi'a* clergy garb the power, they started to export *Shi'ism* in the region. This policy was unacceptable to the *Sunni* regime. In Pakistan, the situation was more severe because a big chunk of the people was practicing *Shi'a*. "Such attitude of Iran's clergy regime brings apprehension in the region. In absolute numbers 20 percent of the population of about 16 million in 1980) they comprised the second-largest *Shi'a* population in the world after Iran."⁴⁰ Such events instigated the use of religion at the state level that finally affected the polity and created havoc among different religious groups.

Before the 1979 Islamic revolution, Pakistan never witnessed any serious *Shi'a*, *Sunni* schism, or sectarian violence of gravity. Even before this, during the British raj, there was a tolerable relationship between *Sunni* and *Shi'a* Muslims. But this balance suddenly shifted into frequent *Sunni*, *Shi'a* sectarian rift in Pakistan. "A very tolerable level of *Sunni-Shi'a* tension was inherited by the country from the British Raj, but the two sects squared off violently only after 1980"⁴¹

Soon this *Shi'a* unrest turned into clashes, furthermore because Zia was a staunchest *Sunni* upbringing and power base instigated the *Sunni*, *Shi'a* rivalry in Pakistan. A regional tussle for hegemony between *Shi'a*, *Sunni* camps played as a catalyst to fight against each other. *Shi'a* retaliated with a full swim when Zia's regime tried to Islamize the Pakistani's state and society on *Sunni* Islam. "Zia ul-Haq's attempts to "Islamise" the legal system, which were strongly influenced by his political alliance with parts of *Sunni* religious lobby,

³⁷Ibid., 172.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Khaled Ahmed, *Sectarian War: Pakistan's Sunni-Shia Violence and its Links to the Middle East* (Lahore: Oxford University Press, Pakistan, 2011)

came as the most important challenge to the *Shi'a's* legal status since the country foundation.”⁴²

The success of clergy in Iran boosted the *Shi'a* religious outfits in the region to fight against the odd forces and to win a similar prize, like their brethren in Iran. This Pandora box disturbed the political-cum religious cart of the whole Persian Gulf and the Middle East. Pakistan was not excluded from this so-called Islamic revolution. The *Shi'a* community in Pakistan re-vitalized to claim their rights once they started getting financial and religious support from neighboring Iran. Iran's *Shi'a* religious seminaries attracted the *Shi'a* youth around the world to study and return as an agent of their political philosophy to their home countries. “The victory of the “Islamic revolution” in February 1979 gave a boost especially to the *Shi'a 'ulama'* and religious-minded youth, but it was a source of pride for almost the entire *Shi'a* community of the country, including many westernized intellectuals.”⁴³

7. Sectarianism

In Pakistan, which aspires to be in some sense an ‘Islamic state,’ sectarian conflict is a part of the society. This study also seeks to analyze some of the factors which have contributed, especially in the past twenty-five years or so, to militant sectarian conflict in Pakistan and to assess the significance of this rather neglected form of Islamic radicalism.

Islamization, or the introduction of ‘Islamic’ norms and institutions through government policy or decree, is another factor that has often provoked and defined sectarian controversies in Pakistan. To Pakistan, Islam means a complete code of life, where Islamic laws will not merely be observed but enforced by the state. But what school of Islamic law would hold sway, and how that would affect those who do not recognize its authority, are questions never adequately resolved in Pakistan. But this matter was tried to be resolved, “when a wide-ranging program of Islamization was initiated in early 1979 by the government of General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq (1977-88).”⁴⁴

The history of sectarian conflict in Pakistan is as old as the existence of this country. Yet, the intensification of the sectarian divide in Pakistan was observed during the late 1970s and early 1980s because of domestic political changes and the implications of the

⁴²Andreas T. Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan: An Assertive and Beleaguered Minority* (New York: Oxford University Press, New York, 2015), 197.

⁴³Khaled Ahmed, *Sectarian War: Pakistan's Sunni-Shia Violence and its Links to the Middle East*, 12-13.

⁴⁴Anita M. Weiss, “On some aspects of this Programme of Islamization,” (ed.), *Islamic Reassertion in Pakistan: The Application of Islamic Laws in a Modern State* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1987); S. Jamal Malik: *Islamisierung in Pakistan 1977-84. Untersuchungen zur Auflösung autochthoner Strukturen* by S. Jamal Malik, Review by: Christian W. Troll Christian W. *Die Welt Des Islams*, New Series 31, no. 2 (1991): 283-85. Accessed September 6, 2021. doi:10.2307/1570597.S.

Islamic revolution in Iran, and the subsequent adverse reaction from some Arab countries created the proxies in the region.

The military regime of General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, which seized power on July 5, 1977, pursued a policy of 'Islamization' resulting in the deepening of the sectarian divide between *Sunnis* and *Shiites* on the one hand and among different *Sunni* groups on the other. The Islamic Revolution of February 1979 was a watershed in mobilizing the *Shi'as* of Pakistan for an assertive role in the state and society.

From any standpoint, the history of sectarian conflict in Pakistan is as old as the existence of this country. Yet, the intensification of the sectarian divide in Pakistan was observed during the late 1970s and early 1980s because of domestic political changes and the implications of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the subsequent adverse reaction in some Arab countries to the assumption of power by clergy operating from the holy city of Qom. The military regime of General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, which seized power on July 5, 1977, pursued a policy of using religion for political purposes by unleashing a process of 'Islamization' resulting in the deepening of the sectarian divide between *Sunnis* and *Shiites* on the one hand and among different *Sunni* groups on the other. As rightly argued by an analyst on conflict and dispute resolution, "he (Zia) followed a policy of *Sunni* sectarianism, which witnessed mushrooming of madrassas all over Pakistan. In 1984 when the Saudi Arabian government demanded that the Pakistani army replace *Shi'a* soldiers in Pakistani army units based in Saudi Arabia with *Sunni* soldiers, General Zia-ul-Haq decided to withdraw the entire contingent of Pakistani troops from that country."⁴⁵ Yet despite almost two decades of the post-Zia era, there is no end to sectarian polemics and hatred, which under the state patronage of Zia-ul-Haq weakened the national unity of Pakistan.

It was only after the controversial process of Islamization unleashed by the military ruler of Pakistan, General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq that sectarian conflict took a violent turn. Zia's policy to introduce Islamic Sharia, which is termed as a radical brand of the *Sunni* Hanafi system of jurisprudence, shattered the bond of unity between *Shi'as* and *Sunni* communities. The imposition of Zakat in Pakistan by the regime of Zia-ul-Haq in 1980 was vehemently resisted by the *Shi'a* leader.

The assertion of militant *Sunni* and *Shi'a* Islam is also the outcome of external factors. Iran and Saudi Arabia were held responsible for fighting their proxy sectarian war in Pakistan. The imposition of Shi'ism in Iran and the fear of a revolution spillover in the neighboring countries led the Arab world, particularly Iraq and Saudi Arabia, to a confrontational path with Tehran. "This perceived fear engaged Iran and Saudi Arabia in a

⁴⁵Moonis Ahmar, "Sectarian Conflicts in Pakistan," *Pakistan Vision* 9, No. 1 (June 2008): 1-19.

proxy war for religio-political influence and clout in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the newly independent Muslim republics of Central Asia.”⁴⁶

8. Refugee Problem

The invasion of the USSR in 1979 on Afghanistan results in the influx of millions of stranded Afghans into Pakistan and other neighboring countries. This was not the first time that Afghan refugees arrived in Pakistan but in the past whenever there is some problem in Afghanistan, the people of Afghanistan crossed the border and landed in Pakistan. These customary movements of the population were never considered large-scale or permanent and dangerous. They were seasonal in character, and the population would return when their winter work in Pakistan had been completed. But this time their stay was prolonged with serious consequences on Pakistan’s state and society.

The Communist coup in April 1978 followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 led to a more permanent exodus of a cross-section of Afghan classes, seeking an escape from political persecution and religious repression. Millions of Afghan refugees started entering Pakistan during this period. Up to this point, the Durand Line and the *Pakhtunistan* issue (had primarily dominated the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. “However, from this time onwards the situation changed; the presence of Afghan refugees became a principal focus in the formulation of Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy.”⁴⁷

But this time, (when the USSR army entered Afghanistan in 1979) they stayed for an uncertain time and situation that impacted the Pakistani’s state and society on large scale. “The Afghanistan crisis, in general, and the large concentration of refugees on Pakistani soil in particular, have given birth to many complex problems which are perhaps less obvious but quite disturbing”. For better understanding these problems could be categories into five sections, those are - economic, social, political, strategic, and foreign policy.”⁴⁸

The presence of Afghan refugees is also perceived to have had a substantial impact on the domestic security environment of Pakistan. They are mostly held responsible for the exacerbating insecurity in the country. Unemployed and stranded Afghan’s tried their luck in every good and bad economic activity once they entered Pakistan. The unwanted war also forced (many of them volunteered to take part in *Jihād*) them to joined militias for economic support or purely to serve religious duties. Initially, Afghans were trained to fight against Russian forces but when they disengaged after winning the holy war, they were involved to bring *shari’ah* (Islamic law) not only in Afghanistan but in Pakistan as well.

⁴⁶Mumtaz Ahmed, Revivalism, Islamization, Sectarianism and Violence in Pakistan,” in *Intellectual Discourse* 6, No. 1 (1998): 11-37.

⁴⁷Anchita Borthakur, “Afghans Refugee: The Impact on Pakistan,” *Asian Affairs* 48:3 (2017): 488-509, doi: [10.1080/03068374.2017.1362871](https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2017.1362871)

⁴⁸Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, “Impact of the Afghan War on Pakistan,” *Pakistan Horizon* 41, No. 1 (January 1988): 23-45.

Degeneration in bordering areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan attracted smugglers to operate networks of arms and drug smuggling. Another scar came into the form of *Shi'a*, *Sunni* sectarian violence. The *Sunni* Arab countries used Afghans *Sunni mujahadeen* to counter Iran's influence in the region. These Iran, Saudi proxies' games multiply the existing sectarian rift in Pakistan. "The ramifications of the Afghan war in Pakistan include the growth of various Islamic groups that have been implicated in the running feuds between *Sunni* and *Shi'a* organizations, ethnic strife, the Talibanisation of Pakistani society, the drug Mafia operating in Pakistan and the smuggling network of small arms and ammunitions which poses a threat to state security in the long run."⁴⁹ Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan has fostered violent conflicts within Pakistani society. Pakistani officials have argued that "Afghan refugees have contributed to an overall criminalization of Pakistani society."⁵⁰

The rise of sectarian conflict can be traced to the use of religion by General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–88) as a tool for regime legitimization when he turned to right-wing Islamic elements for support. This desire subsequently coalesced with the national-security goal of building close linkages with the Afghan *Mujahideen* after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Pakistan, during the 1980s, became a proxy battleground between *Shi'a*-majority Iran and *Sunni*-dominated Saudi Arabia, as both countries tried to exert their influence over their respective sects in Pakistan by financing them through various means such as *Madrasah* (based on sectarian lines) to fight against the Soviets as *Mujahideen* in Afghanistan. During the decade of Afghan Jihād, there were 85 major bombings in Pakistan, the majority of which were sectarian attacks. In the period before 1977, there were only ten incidents of sectarian riots/violence, but in the period 1978–2000, there were 76 such incidents. (Based on tabulations of newspaper headlines as reported in Razi and Shakir in 2001)

The demographic transformations that followed the arrival of the grand influx of Afghan refugees since the 1980s have disturbed the entire ethnic balance of Pakistani society. This has led to the emergence of periodic ethnic and sectarian violence within Pakistan. The security situation of the country is also deteriorating, with an increasing number of armed groups taking up arms against the state. The Pakistani state is also concerned with the increase in criminal activities and the number of drug addicts within the society. Drug trafficking has become ever more common from the 1980s onwards, for which the Afghan refugees are held responsible by many Pakistanis. It has also given rise to militancy and terrorist activities in the state.

⁴⁹ South Asia Terrorism Portal Report on Pakistan; <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/Pakistan/backgrounders/index.html>

⁵⁰Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, "Impact of the Afghan War on Pakistan," *Pakistan Horizon* 41, No. 1 (January 1988): 23-45.

9. Conclusion

The use of Islam from the Pakistani state to achieve internal and external goals backfired on many occasions. Pakistan was internally immersed in various conflicts, and because of these matters, it finds very little from its relationship with the Islamic world. Similarly, Muslim countries were rocked with challenges and crises of immense levels, which yield no viable solutions. The Iranian revolution was proven to be a promise of new beginnings in destabilizing the region and the Muslim World. The situation in Iran was more unstable and chaotic than the Shah time. Similar was the condition in the Arab world that was also not in a better position.

During this period Pakistan paid heavily to face the menace of sectarianism that destroyed its already fragile social fabric. The unending Saudi-Iran rivalry to get hegemony in the region made Pakistan a laboratory of *Shi'a-Sunni* domination. Even today, Pakistan could not get out of the danger of sectarianism. The myopic and hasty policies of the state made Pakistan a launching pad of religious extremism in the region as well. But in all this Pakistan itself was and is the major victim of sectarianism.

On the Afghans refugee issue after six years of heated debates and diplomatic maneuvering of indirect talks in Geneva under the UNO meditation for the settlement of the Afghanistan conflict, Pakistan and Afghanistan signed the agreements. In the following agreements, neither Russia nor *Mujahideen* were the parties, but Russia has tacit approval for this dialogue. Pakistan, accept this accord after much hesitation, and only as a solution to Afghanistan's long conflict going to end. To Pakistan, the Geneva accord just was the beginning of the solution to the Afghan problem. The outbreak of war means, a further stay of refugees in Pakistan, which will bring more disaster for Pakistani polity. Pakistan wants immediate peace in Afghanistan not only for the Afghan people but also for her survival and prosperity. According to Pakistani's president, peace and reconciliation between Pakistan and Afghanistan can be only being envisioned on the foundation of candid Muslim unity. But peace accord once fully functional reopens the Afghan's resistance cleavages, and further withdrawal of Russian forces and American's betrayal with the cause engulfed the region with new adventures that resulted in death and destructions of million people.

Despite all this Democracy now became a practical reality in Pakistan, though with some constraints and limitations. Past fragile experiences required nurturing the democracy to sustain for better prospects of the domestic and international needs of Pakistan. Challenges to democracy are a direct challenge to the foreign policy of Pakistan. If the country perpetually steers the present democratic experiment with strength and substance it can overwhelm its internal and external challenges. The success of a democratic model in Pakistan can hold out a possibility of a new sustainable political model for other Islamic countries, striving for stability.

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